American Foundation for the Blind
Application to the National Endowment for the Humanities
Preservation and Access: Humanities Collections and Resources
Helen Keller Archives Digitization Project
Description of the Project and its Significance

The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) is seeking a grant in the amount of $350,000 for a two-year project to provide expanded access to the Helen Keller Archives through digitization of approximately half the collection, or 40,000 documents (approximately 81,000 digital pages). This is the largest and most important collection of Helen Keller materials extant. The full Archives consist of 146 cubic feet of archival material dating from approximately 1886 through 1980, and include over 80,000 items, representing more than 160,000 digital pages. A finding aid with a full description of the collection at the box and folder level is available online at www.afb.org/ead/eadmain.asp. AFB's long-range goal is to digitize the entire collection and expand the finding aid to provide item-level description and access; this project will begin the process by digitizing some of the most requested and historically significant portions.

Helen Keller bequeathed her extensive, personal archives to AFB upon her death in 1968. Materials include handwritten, typed, and brailled correspondence, memoranda, speeches, reports, flyers, manuscripts, legal contracts, photographs and photograph albums, architectural drawings, press clippings, scrapbooks, audio recordings, film and artifacts (as well as her personal library of 283 volumes, separate from the archival collection.) The archival collection is currently housed at AFB's headquarters in New York City. Selections from the collection are publicly displayed in our New York offices and via the World Wide Web (www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=1).

The Helen Keller Archival Collection provides vital information on a celebrated figure in the history of the United States. Helen Keller was a prolific writer and published author. She was a crusader for the rights of people with sensory and other disabilities, a feminist, a suffragist, a socialist, and a pacifist. The Helen Keller Archives contain decisive literature in the field of education, women, blindness, politics, and the arts. Her archives contain correspondence spanning 70 years of American social, political and cultural history, and include correspondence with many of the most prominent world figures of her day – from Alexander Graham Bell in the late 19th century to President John F. Kennedy in the 20th. These archives are not only a testament to Helen Keller's personal triumph over physical disability but are also a mirror of the battles that she helped fight and the changes that were brought about in support of women's rights, workers rights, and disability rights both at home and abroad.

The main goal of the Helen Keller Archives Digitization Project is to provide access to a growing global audience by digitizing and posting items on a public web site, utilizing techniques that allow usage by people who are blind or visually impaired. Access will be provided by including Optical Character Recognition (OCR) translations, and some full transcriptions of written documents, and by giving online visitors the ability to look at enlarged images. Secondary goals are to reduce physical handling of primary source materials and to better assist researchers and scholars, as well as the general public, with research requests. The digital images will be included in an Encoded Archival Description (EAD) and will be fully searchable.

AFB is the organization to which Helen Keller devoted more than 40 years of her life – a nonprofit organization founded in 1921 to eliminate the inequities faced by millions of Americans who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf-blind. The project will carry on Helen Keller's legacy by creating a dissemination model that will demonstrate to other humanities collections what constitutes the highest standard of accessibility for an essentially visual medium – a model that will allow complete access to people who, like Helen Keller, are blind or visually impaired.